

A SURVEY OF

ROCHESTER'S HISTORIC PARKLANDS



Prepared for:

The City of Rochester

Prepared by:

Bayer Associates

Landscape Architecture and Planning

The Landmark Society of Western New York

Katherine Eggers Comeau

Director of Preservation Services

Charles, A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR

The Cultural Landscape Foundation

Founder and President

December 18, 2009



City of Rochester, NY
Robert J. Duffy, Mayor

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Department of Community Development

Robert J. Duffy, Mayor

Julio Vazquez, Commissioner, Department of Community Development

Peter Siegrist, Project Manager

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BASIC SITE INFORMATION

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|-------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|
| Site Name(s): | Brown Square Park, Brown's Square | Location Description: | Bounded by Brown Street on the SE, Jay Street on the NW, and Verona Street on the NE (Formerly called "Jones Street") |
| Location: | 225 Verona Street | | |
| Coordinates: | UTM: (Datum: WGS-84) Zone: 18T E/N:286824,4781980 | | |
| Tax ID: | 106.690-0001-087.001 | | |
| Existing Zoning: | O-S (Open Space) | | |

PARK INFORMATION

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|---|--|
| Park Type: | Public Square (Subsequently Reform Park) |
| Size: | 4.49 Acres |
| Dimensions: | +/- 580' x 330' |
| Topographic Description: | Berming at periphery, sledding hill, flat central lawn area |
| Date of Construction: | 1822 (deeded Public Square) 1903 (Children's Playground) 1963, 1977 (redesigns) |
| Landscape Architect(s)/Designer(s): | Olmsted Brothers (1904 revisions, never constructed) James Galvin & Associates (1963) Jae Y. Ko (1977) |
| Current landmark designation status: | None |

CULTURAL / HISTORIC INFORMATION

The history of Brown Square, with particular attention to its Olmsted connection, is related in *City of Rochester Small Parks and Squares* (Clark Patterson Associates et al.).

Brown Square is the oldest public park in the city of Rochester, having been part of a 200-acre area purchased and laid out by Dr. Matthew Brown and his brother Francis in 1809-11. Theirs was the second such settlement in what is now the city of Rochester (the first was in the Four Corners area). At the center of their settlement, which was known as Frankfort, the Browns laid out a square for a courthouse. The courthouse was ultimately built near the Four Corners, and the Browns deeded their square to the City of Rochester under the condition that it would forever be a public square. The square was used in the 19th century as a military parade ground and for religious gatherings, among other uses.

According to parks historian Tim O'Connell, Brown Square is the only park in Rochester whose location shifted. Initially, the square was made up of lots on both the north and south sides of Brown Street. In about the 1830s, lots on the north side of Brown Street were sold and an equal sized parcel purchased on the south side of the square, so that the entire square was south of Brown Street.

By 1888, the square's layout included three major paths crossing the park: two diagonal paths connecting each of the four corners and a third path crossing through the middle from Jay to Brown streets. According to Common Council minutes from 1893, Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot were hired to design improvements to the square; however, no drawings survive to show what they may have designed.

The park, along with other existing small parks, came under the purview of the Rochester Park Commission in 1894.

Advocates of the Reform Park movement in the 1890s and 1900s supported creation of supervised parks intended primarily for the structured instruction of children, and in 1903, Brown Square became the city's first official playground. New facilities added in 1903-06 included a brick and stone shelter, restrooms, a wading pool, skating rink, outdoor gymnasium, toboggan slide, and play apparatus. As part of the transformation of Brown Square into a Reform Park, the Olmsted Brothers created an elaborate plan to incorporate these new features; due to concerns about the expense of carrying out the original plan, the design was revised and somewhat simplified, yet this design was not carried out, either. In a September 1904 site visit, J. C. Olmsted noted that "practically nothing" had been done except to erect a small shelter for children, and even that "looks bad."

In the first few decades of the 20th century, Brown Square was considered a model playground and was heavily used for children's programs. The 1911 Park Commissioners' Report noted that "turf and big trees, a substantial house, and, best of all, a wading pool give delight," while an article in the journal of the Playground Association of America stated that "the playground at Brown's Square is now so complete in its equipment that it may be considered a model by all progressive communities, and as the years go by it will doubtless be duplicated in every section of our city."

As the popularity of such Reform-era attractions and programs declined in the mid-20th century, and as the neighborhood surround Brown Square lost its residential character, use of the park declined as did maintenance. By the time of a 1960 photograph of the park, it consisted of open grass with a baseball backstop, a paved parking area around the building, and basketball courts.

In 1963, the park was redesigned by James Glavin and Associates of Syracuse, with new plantings, new play equipment, and new grading consisting of major mounds around existing plant materials. The diagonal paths were removed and replaced with a more curvilinear layout. Of 17 existing trees, 16 were kept, and new trees were added, mostly at the southeastern end of the park.

Another renovation of the playground occurred in 1977, designed by Rochester architect Jay Y. Ko. This design called for most existing trees to be removed and over 90 new trees planted.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Setting and Neighborhood Context:

Brown Square Park currently exists within a former industrial area of the City and remnants of this use surround the park, including expansive parking lots, warehouse structures, and other non-descript

buildings/uses. The park sits within an urban context but does not generally see high activity. The park is sited near Kodak Headquarters/Kodak Tower and adjacent to shared parking lots for Kodak offices and Frontier Field.

Natural Systems and Features:

No natural topography or other natural/geologic features exist on the site. Topography has been heavily modified through reiterative design modifications, including the addition of grass berms, small hills, and a large sledding hill that is approximately 12' in height and 150' in diameter. Existing tree canopy is likely important to the general ecology of the urban forest, however, invasive species such as Norway Maple are prevalent.

Spatial Organization:

The park currently includes several designed sub-spaces. Curving concrete pathways provide pedestrian entrance at the northeast and southeast corners. The southeast corner includes picnic area with tables in a grove of trees, adjacent to a flat central lawn area.

A raised planter garden and seating area is located near Brown Street, on the southern side of the park, adjacent to the entry paths from Brown and Verona streets. A brick shelter structure is centrally located on the western periphery, fronting the central lawn space. A large concrete pad area exists along the path between the raised planters and seating area and the brick shelter. A large sledding hill is located in the northwest corner of the park. The entry path area northeast corner of the park, fronting Verona and Jay streets, contains paved walkways off of Jay Street, the corner of Jay and Verona, and Verona Street, ultimately combining and continuing between the central lawn and sledding hill, toward the brick shelter.

The central lawn area and other flat spaces within the park are at grade with the surrounding neighborhood. However, small grass berms (2 to 3 feet in height) along park periphery visually separate the park from the sidewalks and surrounding uses.

Buildings and Structures:

A 30'x 50' historic brick structure with cobble stone foundation (erected 1903) remains on site. This structure is located centrally along the western periphery, facing the central lawn area. The structure appears to be in reasonable condition, but does not appear to be used.

The seating area at the southern end of the site contains a raised teardrop-shaped concrete planter (approximately 40" in height) and is currently planted with perennials and annuals. The concrete planter has built-in benches of wood attached to the concrete. Additional similar concrete seat walls are sited at radius around the central planter. Concrete and wood seating area appears to be in reasonable structural condition, but exhibits staining and a worn appearance.

Water Features:

No water features are known to currently exist in Brown Square Park.

Materials / Paving materials:

Paving materials throughout the site generally consist of three types. Most pathways are concrete, including paths leading to and from corner entry areas. Secondary pathways of flagstone set into cement in a grid pattern surround the seating area to the south. A similar flagstone pathway is located northeastern corner of the park, connecting the sidewalk to the park's concrete pathway system. Additionally, worn brick paving surrounds the base of the park building.

Vegetation:

Vegetation includes large expanses of lawn, deciduous shade trees, and shrubs. Shrubs are located only along the western boundary and include Euonymus and Yews. Deciduous shade trees are dispersed throughout the site. Trees frame the margins of the central lawn area, sledding hill, and park building, and exist in thicker groves near the paved pedestrian entrances. Trees mainly include Norway Maple, Red Maple, Honey Locust, London Plane, and Redbud. Most vegetation appears to be in generally good condition.

A raised concrete planter is centrally located in a sitting area at the south end of the park site. The planter is planted with annuals and perennials.

Furnishings/Monuments:

Park lighting is provided by 1960-70's "cobra-head" fixtures on straight galvanized steel poles, approximately 28' in height. Poles are slightly corroded and exhibit wear. Several (8-10) picnic standard wood and galvanized steel picnic tables are located in the grove of trees near the southeast corner of the site. No other furnishings or monuments are located on the site.

Circulation:

Pedestrian circulation includes mainly curvilinear concrete walkways, bringing pedestrians in from the park's corners, typically joining into a central path leading towards the brick building. The main pathway leading north-south through the site also has raised "bridge" areas that once contained hand railings at the edges of the walkway. No existing culverts or other underpasses existing under these raised "bridge" areas.

No public vehicular circulation routes or parking areas currently exist within the park.

INTEGRITY**Setting and Neighborhood Context:**

The historic neighborhood context included a mix of residential and commercial uses, with mainly small-scale, single-family detached housing fronting the surrounding streets around the public square. During subsequent years, the introduction of industrial uses, including a railroad yard adjacent to the park, significantly changed the characteristics of the neighborhood. By 1929, the park was noted to be "in a congested neighborhood, with railroad yards" and residential structures likely no longer existed in the

area. Continued expansion of industrial uses and redevelopment of the area has significantly changed the neighborhood context over the years.

Natural Systems and Features:

Due to the urban context and lack of original natural features, the integrity of the park's natural systems has not changed significantly. From the Public Square era and on, the park has been in a heavily urban context. The topography of the park appears to have changed greatly with the introduction of grass berms at the periphery and a 12' high sledding hill.

Spatial Organization:

The spatial organization of Brown Square Park has been moderately changed from the Public Square and Reform Park eras. While the park building has remained, the path system has been heavily modified. All site components related to the former playground use have been removed and more passive recreational activity areas have been developed. Spatially, the areas are still divided similar to the park as shown in a 1918 aerial photo (Department of Engineering Records). The wading pool has been replaced with a planting bed and sitting area, and the sports courts in the northwest corner have been replaced by a sledding hill.

Buildings and Structures:

The brick shelter with cobble foundation was constructed in 1904 and currently exists in its original location on the site. The structure remains intact and is likely the only historical feature in the park that has not been significantly altered.

Other existing structures on the site, including seatwalls/retaining walls, have been recently introduced (1970's) and are not components of the park during the Public Square or Reform Park periods.

Water Features:

A wading pool was introduced the site in 1905 and was widely used, representing an important part of the park's Reform Park/playground significance. The wading pool was removed at some point after 1963. No traces of this structure currently exist. The existing raised planter, curved seating walls, and flagstone path are now in the former location of the wading pool.

Materials / Paving materials:

No paving areas original to the park's period of significance remain except for possible brick and concrete paving areas immediately adjacent to the park building. Since the curvilinear path system as shown in the Olmsted Brothers plan (1904) were never developed, the original path system would be related to the park as a Public Square. This path system was very formal, with concrete walks extending diagonally from the park corners into a central space in front of the park building.

Vegetation:

Existing vegetation has mostly been planted since initial redevelopment in the 1960's. A photograph from 1960 (Rochester Department of Engineering Records) shows only two large shade trees adjacent to the park building, and these trees have subsequently been removed. All trees on site appear to be planted during either the 1963 or 1977 park renovations. No specimen or otherwise historically significant vegetation remains from the Public Square or Reform Park periods.

The existing vegetation, though mostly planted since 1977, does present characteristics of both the Public Square and Reform Park eras, including generally lawn areas with shade trees interspersed, accentuating the park design, and framing spaces. However, no specialized garden areas or ornamental plantings exist.

Furnishings/Monuments:

No monuments and very few furnishings currently exist in the park. Existing lighting is not consistent with Public Square or Reform Park eras and has been introduced since 1963.

Circulation:

Park pedestrian circulation has been heavily modified from the historic Public Square era. Records show the original as a straight path system, converging diagonally from the park corners, meeting in a small central plaza space. The current path system, which is curvilinear and originates from the park corners, more closely resembles the path system found on the 1904 Olmsted Brothers development plan.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE & ELIGIBILITY EVALUATION

Of all the parks in this survey, Brown Square is perhaps the most difficult to classify in terms of its National Register eligibility. It possesses historical significance under National Register Criterion A as one of the earliest public squares in the city of Rochester and a remnant of the significant settlement of Frankfort, as the site of the first public playground in the city, and as one of the first and most heralded examples of an early-20th century Reform Park in Rochester. Its period of significance encompasses both the Public Square era and the Reform Park eras, and stretches from 1809 into the 1930s.

As described above, however, existing park features, with the exception of the park shelter, do not reflect either the Public Square or Reform Park history of the park. While the park retains its historic boundaries and some general aspects of the historic spatial organization, park features today, including the circulation system, topography, plantings, and other elements, reflect the 1960s and 1970s redesigns. The park's context has similarly been altered from a primarily residential setting to an urban and industrial setting, and no longer reflects the context in which the park existed in either the Public Square or Reform Park eras.

The stone and brick park shelter, which survives from 1903, is the sole remnant of the significant Reform Park history of the park and may be individually eligible for the National Register, with the park as its site but the existing landscape a noncontributing element.

Alterations to the park in the 1960s and 1970s, currently less than 50 years old, do not appear to meet the criteria for "exceptional significance" and therefore are not eligible for the National Register at this

time. This should be evaluated as time passes, as changes to historic fabric can acquire their own significance over time and may be considered eligible at some point in the future.

Overall, therefore, it is the finding of this survey that the square as a whole is not eligible for the National Register due to a loss of landscape integrity, but that the shelter should be further explored for potential National Register listing; such listing could lead to funding opportunities for a rehabilitation of this interesting building. Even if it is ultimately found ineligible, the building is an excellent candidate for rehabilitation.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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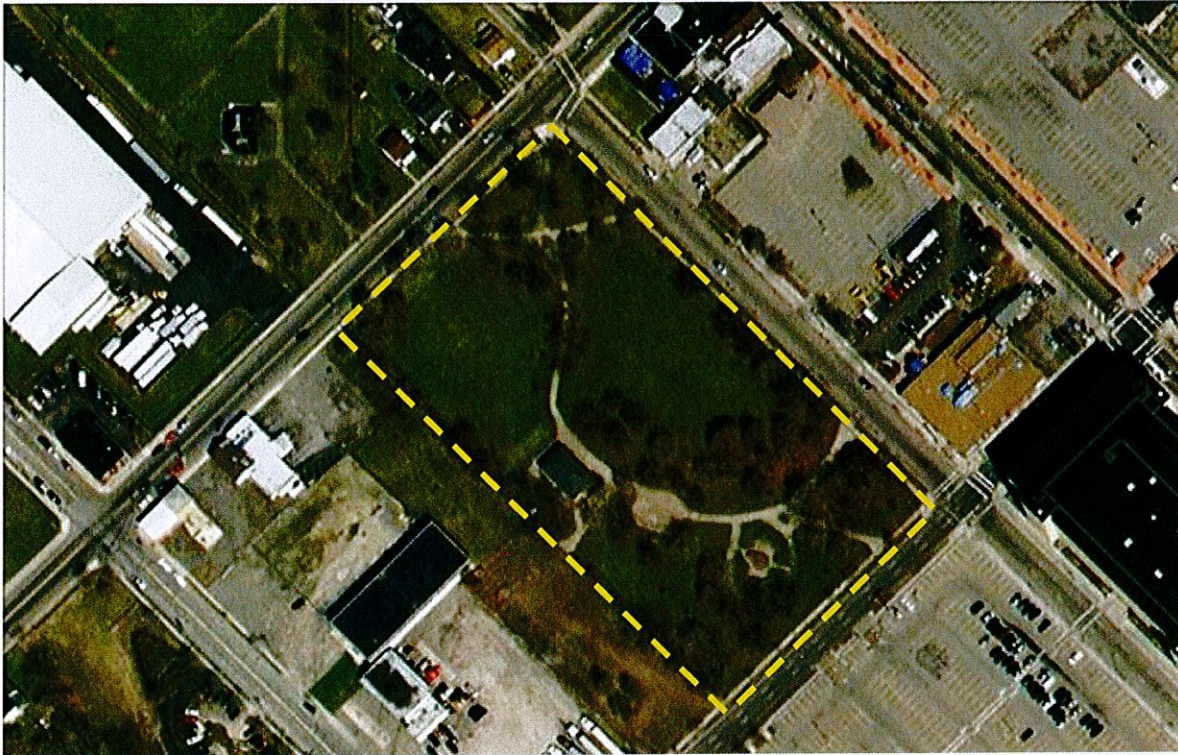
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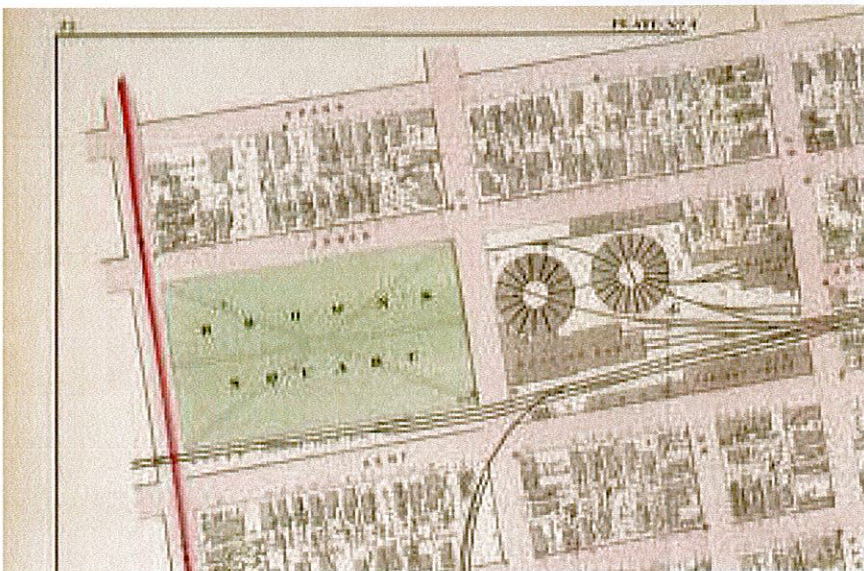
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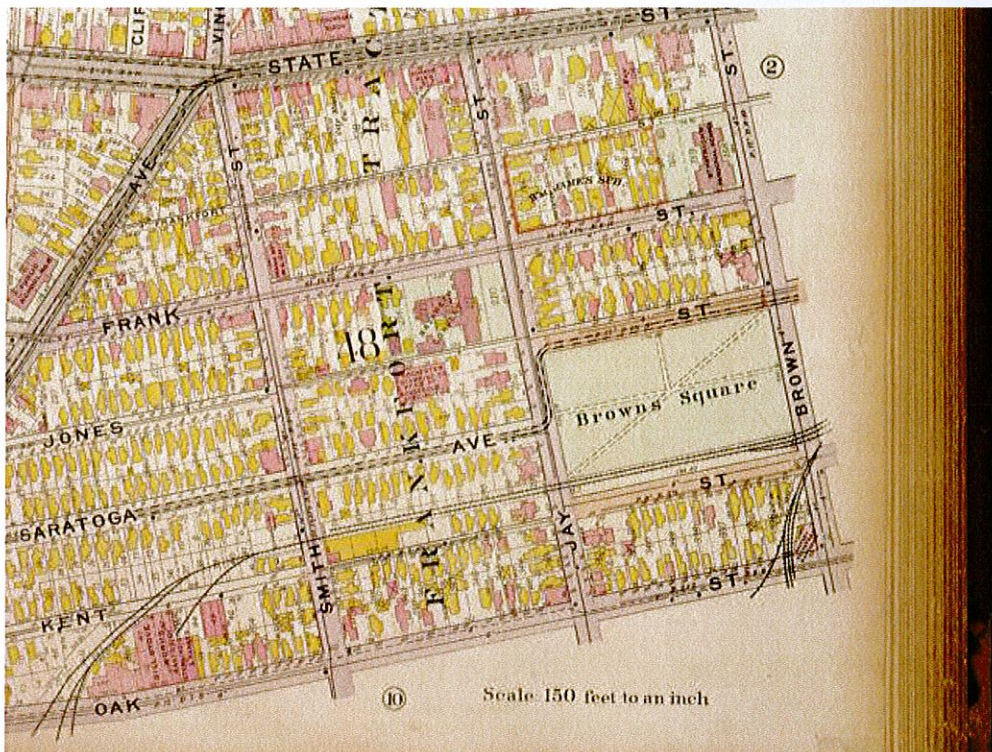
SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS, PLANS, AND PHOTOGRAPHS



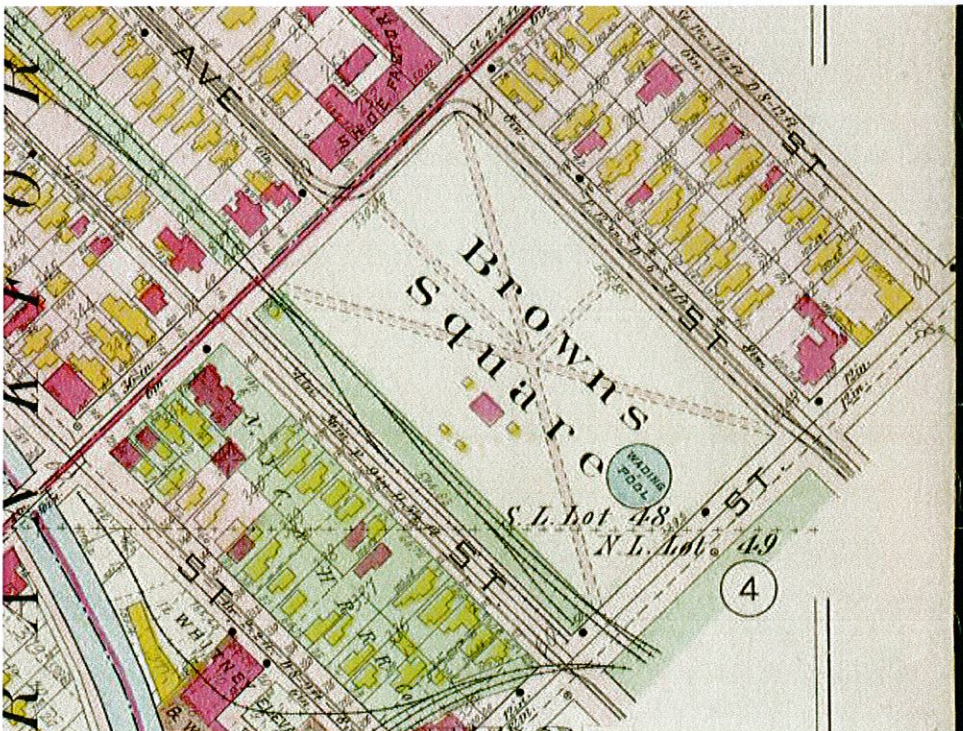
Brown Square Park, aerial photo. (Google / NYS GIS Clearinghouse, 2005)



1875 plat map



1900 plat map



1910 plat map



rp01474.jpg Rochester Public Library Local History Division

Brown Square playground, 1903



From the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center, Rochester, N. Y.

Brown Square Park, wading pool. (Albert Stone Collection, courtesy RMSC)



Browns Square Park, looking southwest, 2009



Browns Square Park, looking east, 2009